



PROJECT PROPOSAL
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i. Introduction

It's probably safe to state that a number of people spend part of their teenage years thinking their family is the most dysfunctional out there. I, for one, was under this impression. Now that age released me from the spell of exceptionality, even of the negative kind, I know that every family has dysfunctional sides to it to account for. Indeed, it would seem that being dysfunctional is in the natural order of family affairs. This is why I was not too shocked not long ago when, after looking for details on web archives and forums related to an album of photographs from Africa in the mid-30s that has been in my family's possession for decades, I learned that my maternal grandfather was a Black Shirt (a member of the MVSN, that is to say, the voluntary fascist militia) who fought in the second Italo-Ethiopian war. It's quite matter-of-fact: from a historical perspective, my grandfather was a villain—and of the worst kind.



Grandfather during the Italo-Ethiopian campaign, 1936.

I never met my grandfather, as he was dead almost one decade before I was born. Pictures of him and by him were, together with random documents and words from other members of the family, the only traces that he actually ever existed. The album was a very peculiar trace of him, as the pictures in it were from a world that no one else in our family had ever been part of. Some of the photos the album contained terrified me; nevertheless, they became part of my childhood's visual imagination, as much as reproductions of Pellizza's *The Fourth State* or the pink elephants in *Dumbo*. For years the album in question was stashed in various bookshelves, first in my grandmother's sitting room, then in my own, in turns rubbing elbows with *The Woman's Encyclopedia* (from grandmother) and books on the collections of the Musée d'Orsay and the Louvre (from my parents). It was therefore a common sight, and yet at the same time it was a lost relic. Nobody spoke about it, nobody seemed to know exactly what was in it, and why.

ii. What I want to make

As I *inherited* the infamous album, I now feel a certain responsibility to understand it. This is a crucial reason why the final project I have in mind for this year wants to explore it as a space where, for good or bad, the imagination of a singular person came alive. I want to explore the album's ties with what surrounded it, which means, among other things, the possibility of dealing with what its construction meant and the inevitable consequences it produced.

In more practical terms, I want to attempt a deconstruction of the album. The object album has always been a veritable totem, keeping watch and influencing its surroundings in sure even though imperceptible ways. As objects are never innocent even when we perceive them as such, I

can see how the diffusion of objects of this kind—in homes like mine and elsewhere—must have exercised a silent authority over time, with consequences that are still in plain view today. Hence, I see a deconstruction of this specific object as a metaphorical act, not only of acknowledgement of this authority, but also of neutralization of the same.

At the end of the journey, I plan to have a publication in the shape of the thesis, which documents the process of physical and conceptual dismembering, and a multimedia work that will comprise still and moving images taken from, connected to and/or inspired by the album. The thesis wouldn't in this manner be limited to an explanation of the practice-based work, but a parallel work on the same subject, either its foundation or an expansion.



The album's front cover, 2018.

iii. How I want to make it

First of all, I want to spend enough time to study the context that made the album possible: naturally, the nationalist and imperialist impulses present within the socio-political climate of the time are the foremost referents I need to face. I also want to grasp the contemporary visual culture—the diffusion of private photo albums for instance—side by side with popular forms of expression such as cinema and literature that may have influenced it, even indirectly. There is an abundance of information on the subject and I plan to read and watch on it, at least in part, while I keep developing my project.

At the moment I am trying to gather basic information on the album's photographs, not so much for a need for absolute historical accuracy, but be able to penetrate its essence. Part of the fascination of this project for me is after all in the realization that the album is a cipher which I will not be able to solve entirely. Therefore, I assume that my research will be an open ended one. I will of course need to make scans from the album, to have documentation and also to be able to manipulate its contents as the project dictates. The acts of scanning and scrutinizing I see as integral steps in the project's development.

iv. Who can help me

As much as I am wary of it at the moment, I believe it will be necessary to start a conversation about the album with the surviving members of my family—that is, mostly, my mother. It will also be extremely important for me to have a continuous flow of feedback, and to receive suggestions about additional information that may help me finding the most appropriate angle and tone to approach the research as I progress. In addition to the above, I can foresee that I will need technical advice, concerning the most efficient and effective ways to make use of available tools, and this in strict relation with the material at hand.

v. Why I want to make it

I want to make use of the album's defined theatrical character, as this very character I can see as the most accessible reading entry to interpreting a larger social context. I want therefore to use this character as speculative matter, to test the limits between the private and the public. Through this work, I am not looking to give an answer to the many questions that the present moment is posing with ever increasing urgency, but to better frame them through a process of visual and verbal dismantling and reshaping.

I feel the idea behind this project has a connection with the present moment, not so much within the obvious discussion about resurgence of extreme right wing tendencies in Europe—which certainly is a pertinent one to be noted—but mostly within a discourse on historical memory and amnesia, on the marked fictional element in both.

vi. Relation with previous practice

Previously, I developed work that questioned understanding of historical micro- and macro-events connecting them with our visual culture, imposing on these events a forced perspective, that of spatial imagination. This forced perspective was especially evident, even though in varying degrees, in the body of work produced in the course of the last academic year, and it was interwoven with preoccupations concerning the notion of ambiguity in morality of the single as opposed to external impositions—from communities, societies, states, and so on. In several pieces, factual information from diverse sources, with special attention to mass media, was abstracted from its original context in order to expand its scope. This movement towards abstraction and the process of deconstruction-reconstruction was for instance at the core of *Universal Time* and *Repérages*, both making use of archival and found imagery to reflect on the destructive effects that faceless power in its various forms has on the individual. Both these works isolated secondary elements present in source imagery and made them the dominant of the reconstruction.



Detail of Emmanuel Macron's presidential portrait with clock (left) and 3D clock replica (right).

It's my intention for the graduation work to stem from these previously explored themes; I also want to make use of some of the experiences gathered in my recent practice, both in the researching and making stages. Even though this means I expect the new work to entertain a dialogue with what came before it, I however don't plan for it to be a pure repetition of a scheme. What I would like to do is to move forward on the path of blending the boundary between authentically photographic and computer generated, still and moving image, in view of the construction of a semi-fictional space and story deriving directly from the examination of the album.

vii. Relation with larger context

The frame of reference for this project is one that incorporates works that are very diverse, ranging from the visual arts to literature. Among those that I find have a kinship with my work are for instance Christian Boltanski, who employed extensively photographic albums, and Peter Piller, who built several of his pieces around the idea of redefining archival material. A more meaningful influence comes from writers as Sebald, who explored in books such as *Austerlitz* and *The Rings of Saturn* the connections between private and public memory.

viii. References

This is a tentative bibliography of texts in continuous expansion that I plan to use both for better placing my planned work into context and as a reference for the making of the work itself.

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- * Luciano Serra Pilota, 1938. Directed by Goffredo Alessandrini. Italy: Aquila Cinematografica.
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- * Abuna Messias, 1939. Directed by Goffredo Alessandrini. Italy: Romana Editrice Film.
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c. Miscellanea

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